

# DALLAS LIFE MAGAZINE

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## BUYING TIME

How Dallas got to be a center  
of the black market in unapproved AIDS drugs

BY BILL MINUTAGAN



There are 500,000 pills crammed into the trunk of the rented Lincoln Continental.

Ron Woodroof, a foul-mouthed outlaw who is as wiry as an octillo, is hanging out in the edgy Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo. He has bought his usual bottle of tequila and has carefully placed it on top of the boxes of pills.

Sometimes, before he takes his chances driving into Mexico to pick up his drugs, he dresses as a priest. Sometimes he dresses as a doctor — white lab coat, stethoscope, plastic name tag.

Sometimes, as on this trip, he takes the Lincoln to a mechanic who installs heavy-duty air shocks that keep the car from sagging when it is loaded down with underground narcotics.

"Oh hell," mutters hawk-faced, short-haired Ron. He sounds like Dr. Red Duke's wicked twin. "If you're just a little bit careful, they ain't ever going to rub you."

Since 1986, when he quit his job in Dallas as a licensed electrical contractor, he's made this trip across the unpredictable Mexican border 300 times, he says. He is careful, but it never gets easier. You sweat a lot and your hands feel like fish. You live in a low-rent motel while waiting for your connection. You worry about *federales*, informers, the Drug Enforcement Administration and people who would kill you for your drugs or money.

"I've never been shot. Yet," he says.

"Under normal smuggling conditions, I probably commit six felonies and God knows how many misdemeanors," he smoothly offers. He waves his hand dismissively. "I gave up trying to keep up with those misdemeanors. Man, those are peanuts."

To prepare for this border crossing he sat with a legal pad in his lap across from the U.S. checkpoint on the Rio Grande, watching for routines. He was hunting for a numerical pattern, something to indicate when the border guards are likely to stop someone. After he figured it out, he had gone into Nuevo Laredo and loaded the Lincoln with his pills.

Now, he has doubled back, crossed the Rio Grande and is pulling into the U.S. checkpoint.

"Are you a U.S. citizen?" asks the green-uniformed U.S. border officer.

"Yes, sir, I am," replies Ron.

Suddenly, he hears a whistling sound from the back of the Lincoln. Air is escaping from the heavy-duty shocks. The Lincoln begins to slump under the weight of all the pills.

Ron stares straight ahead. The guard seems to take forever.

Finally, the border officer bends

The Dallas Buyer's Club keeps his profile in the capital building on Texas Avenue.



# BUYING TIME

World traveler Ron Woodroof smuggles drugs — and hope — for people with AIDS

BY BILL MINUTAGLIO



over, looks into the window of the Lincoln and says to move on.

The back of the car is sagging. As Ron steps on the gas, the Lincoln loudly scrapes a bump in the street.

Ron picks up speed. The Lincoln and the 500,000 pills blend into the mad streets of Laredo. From his rearview mirror he can see that no one is chasing him.

And, as he hits Interstate 35 for the seven-hour trip back to Dallas, Ron Woodroof thinks about the fact that he has lived up to his reputation as the nerviest cowboy in the AIDS underground. The smuggled drugs in his trunk are experimental treatments designed for terminally ill people with the AIDS virus.

The drugs are not approved for use by the federal government. But now that Ron Woodroof has gotten his pills into the United States he will quietly distribute them from coast to coast to desperate cash-paying customers.

He was diagnosed HIV positive in 1986. He and his girlfriend — who also has tested positive for the AIDS virus — have come to the studied conclusion that, sometimes, desperate times really do demand desperate measures.

"This is mandatory, that is the problem," barks Ron, back in the cramped safety of his anonymous Dallas office. "It is not a matter of whether or not you want to take these risks, it's a matter that you *have* to take these risks."

"That's the bottom line. I don't like it, because if they ever snag me they are going to find all kinds of crap to file charges on. I'll be carrying too much cash, too many drugs, too much everything. It will be one charge after another. It will be a list — as long as your arm."

Thousands of people argue that in order to stay alive a few more days, a few more weeks, they must rely on the drugs Ron Woodroof smuggles for the Dallas Buyer's Club. They say the government and pharmaceutical companies are conspiring to play God with their lives — and are trying to make money by limiting the number of AIDS drugs on the market.

The government and companies thunder that AIDS patients are playing Russian roulette with risky medications — ones that will kill them.

For many HIV-positive people, risking death is a moot point. Like most, Bill Hunt remembers exactly when he was first confronted with his



own mortality. The news settled on him like a shroud. It was November 1986, and physicians told him he would be dead in two years.

"Surprise," he says in 1992.

Unlike most people, Bill Hunt decided to take his fate into his own hands. Not the government's hands. His hands, he says, rescued him from being one of almost 150,000 Americans who have died from AIDS. He and many he knows are regular customers for Ron Woodroof's products.

Is it a matter of managing his own destiny?

"Managing your own survival," he dryly replies.

Today, at the AIDS Resource Center in Dallas, he oversees several programs for women and men who don't have the money, knowledge or skills to independently care for themselves. Eighty percent of them live at the poverty level while trying to stave off a costly, voracious disease.

Bill Hunt says his work has pulled many things into focus. He now knows why terminally ill people who cannot afford meals will still spend anything they can on experimental drugs.

"We are always looking for something, some way to stay alive," he says in a voice devoid of emotion.

Thousands of HIV-positive people in the United States are doing the same thing. There are nine major, primarily non-profit, "buyer's clubs" and most of them work in the same surprisingly organized way.

Interested customers have been given product price lists which contain hundreds of items, from "milk thistle" to more controversial substances like Compound Q, DDC and alpha interferon. The Dallas club has carried as many as 112 chemicals that are not approved in the United States.

The clubs purchase the products with money pooled from members. The substances can come from any number of sources, including underground American chemists or countries (England, Germany, Japan, Denmark and others) that have approved the products.

The clubs send drugs to labs for purity tests. They mark up the price to cover the costs of smuggling, analysis, shipping and other factors. Finally, the buyer's clubs warn — again and again — that customers use the products at their own risk.

No one has been able to compile exact statistics on the number of people who have been made sick or who lost their lives with experimental medications.

Since the entire network is a byproduct of an anti-establishment movement, such numerical niceties are

hard to come by. For instance, Compound Q — smuggled in from China — has been blamed for several cases of dementia and at least two deaths. While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration acknowledges it has heard such reports, a spokesman says the agency hasn't pursued definitive statistics because the substance is not a licensed

The first, New York's PWA Health Group, began in 1987 and now serves about 5,000 people who spend roughly \$1.25 million a year, according to some published reports. San Francisco's club, The Healing Alternatives Foundation, has close to 7,000 members.

The Dallas club, also founded in 1987 and still overseen by Ron



Ron Woodroof is the Dallas Buyer's Club's operator and chief smuggler. "If it is out there, if I can get my hands on it, if I can buy, bribe, steal or whatever, I will go for it," he says.

drug.

Some of the clubs do business in cities you wouldn't suspect. The ultra-aggressive one in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has half of its 12,000 members calling or faxing orders from as far away as Australia and Japan. Some clubs, depending on where they are and who is in charge, prefer to remain deeply underground. Others operate with an almost startling openness.

Woodroof has 4,000 regular customers. It also has a hard-earned reputation as the wildest, most risk-taking group at work in the country.

"They are on the cutting edge; they don't give a damn what people think about them," insists Tom Blunt, the head of a much more conservative buyer's club in Atlanta, which has cultivated ties to mainstream social service agencies. "A lot of it is that kind of cow-

boy or pirate attitude, that sense of fighting back."

He and others say that the Dallas club is valuable to AIDS patients around the world. It does risky, dirty smuggling work that other clubs avoid. And, it supplies other buyer's clubs with products they would never attempt to bring into the United States.

Meanwhile, though there are plenty of critics, some HIV-positive customers in Dallas relish both the image and the reality of their club. For many it translates into the difference between life and death.

"Hey, I'm grateful that I live in Dallas, Texas, and we have a buyer's club as good as we have. I think it has saved a lot of lives," offers Bill Hunt, who thinks the Dallas club's combative personality must be weighed against what he describes as a pitiful lack of mainstream services in Texas. "We don't have the kind of time to wait for you," he says, referring to mainstream medicine. "And, yes, we are willing to take big chances."

He is burdened by a deadly malady called MAI, a bacteria-borne sickness, which some physicians say is the leading cause of death among people with AIDS in Dallas County. Months ago, he was desperately on the search for a then-unapproved antibiotic called clarithromycin. The word in the drug underground was that it could help keep people with MAI alive. The Food and Drug Administration was still waiting for test results on the drug when Mr. Hunt learned that his brother was making a trip to the U.S. from Europe — where clarithromycin was available through certain laboratories.

He called his brother: "Look, you have to get this drug. I need this drug."

He arranged to buy a \$2,000, two-month supply. The very day his brother arrived with the shipment was the very day that the FDA finally granted approval for clarithromycin's use.

Bill Hunt has never regretted his move or the money that he invested in the underground market. He still regularly goes to the Dallas club for whatever he believes will stave off death. And he thinks the entire underground network is more than invaluable. For him it is an indication of how little regard politicians, the FDA and bottom-line-oriented pharmaceutical firms have for people with AIDS.

"We live in a country where politicians and others won't even support (prevention) programs that will save their own kids' lives. Against that landscape, do they care about people who already have AIDS, who happen to be an expendable population?"

"We created the institutions, the buyer's clubs, all across the country not





"We are always looking for something, some way to stay alive," says Bill Hunt, who works at the AIDS Resource Center.

because we were so smart and knew that we needed them. We created them because nobody else is going to do it for us."

It's a little after 11 a.m. in the Swiss Avenue office of the Dallas Buyer's Club. The occasional drop of rain is hitting the black car — the one heavily dotted with Mexican car-insurance stickers — parked in the driveway.

There are interesting things in the news this day. Vice President Dan Quayle, not known as an AIDS hero, has been announcing initiatives aimed to speed access to new drugs. Also, Parkland Memorial Hospital is announcing that an experimental antibiotic, rifabutin, may help prevent deadly infections.

It's hard to tell, but Ron Woodroof, cantankerous as a character in *Lone-Some Dove*, seems either unaware of both news items or doesn't care.

"They can say they're going to do all these things, but where is the action?" he wants to know as he leans back in his chair and cradles his second mug of coffee.

Ron Woodroof says he knows where the action is. In his mind, it all boils down to numbers. The number of white blood cells you have, the number of pills you take, the number of days between pills — the number of days you have left to live. You add up all these statistics and figure out what approved or unapproved drugs you want to take. It is, he says, that simple.

"Here are some numbers for you," he begins. "I haven't figured it out recently, but as of December, my chances of being alive were 20,000 to 1. I much doubt I would sit down at a card table with those odds. The key is knowing yourself. It's a rat race, but hell, if you know what you are doing, you just cruise."

He could be talking about the dangerous smuggling, but this is about being the master of your own fate — or at least your own pharmacy.

"Look at peptide T," he demands, referring to an experimental treatment used for AIDS-related dementia. "I have no choice with peptide T. It is the only line I have to staying alive. When I stop it, I start dragging my leg. I urinate on myself. I can't speak. I slobber all over the damn place."

In 1990, the government cracked

down and told his supplier to stop shipping the drug from Denmark. A few weeks before Christmas 1990, Ron filed a lawsuit against the FDA in order to obtain peptide T.

"I'll take a bigger chance than anybody else. If it is out there, if I can get my hands on it, if I can buy, bribe, steal or whatever, I will go for it," he says. "If you are going to live, you can't accumulate too much information. I don't buy anybody's story. I don't care what a physician tells me. I get my own numbers."

A California federal judge eventually ruled against Ron Woodroof — but a deal was struck with the FDA to allow him to get the drug and supply the FDA with his personal data.

It wasn't the first time that the controversial man from Dallas wrote his own chapter in the tortured history of AIDS in America.

When rumors of a promising treatment arise, word surges through the AIDS underground. Buyer's clubs hastily call sympathetic experts deep inside the often hostile medical establishment. Members scramble to pore over texts (Ron Woodroof goes to the

University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center library). If they can obtain a sample, buyer's clubs instantly turn to the handful of friendly U.S. laboratories to have it analyzed.

Sometimes, people in search of a new treatment find themselves victimized by the 1990s version of traveling medicine men. Every week, the heads of the buyer's clubs find themselves sitting across from articulate strangers holding briefcases filled with promises.

"We tell people that if anybody mentions the four-letter word 'cure' you need to hold on to your wallet and run," cautions Lenny Kaplan, the fast-talking leader of the rambunctious buyer's club in Fort Lauderdale. "One of the best money-making frauds today is in the realm of life-threatening illnesses." To stay on top of the scam masters, his products are tested at the University of Kent's pharmacology school in England.

Ron Woodroof, as usual, is more to the point: "Ain't nobody going to sprinkle (expletive) on my head and tell me I'm cured." But, because this is AIDS, because you have to know, you listen to every stranger and chase down every hint.

In 1990, alpha interferon was what people were talking about. It was an item spurred along with research done by, of all people, an obscure Amarillo veterinary scientist.

Attention immediately shifted to Japan and a lab supplying researchers with the experimental and still hotly debated substance.

In March 1990, Ron Woodroof hurried to organize his overseas smuggling kit. He was chasing that day's *Umsau*.

There was \$25,000 in small bills, better for bribes. There were the muted shirts and suits, better for not drawing attention. His businessman's black leather briefcase. The long coat to drape over the briefcase.

After flying into Tokyo's Narita Airport, he headed for the headquarters of Hayashibara Biochemical Laboratories and sat across the street. He waited until employees got off work and strolled from their building to a small, nearby bar.

Joining the workers, he bought rounds of drinks, cracked jokes and hung out. Through one of them — and after a \$500 bribe — he was eventually able to obtain a copy of the firm's accounts receivable. He combed through the list until he found a Tokyo physician who was 90 days late on his payment to the company.

He called the fiscally troubled physician. "I'll pay you \$1,000 for an



office visit," he told the Japanese doctor. An appointment was instantly made.

The doctor eventually ordered 36 vials of interferon for his new American friend. Ron packed it on dry ice in his briefcase.

By the time he got to the airport, condensation was forming on the outside of the briefcase. Worse, the dry ice was making little puffs of smoke. Ron decided to stash the drug, along with a little ice, in a locker.

With the rest of the ice in his briefcase, he approached the white-gloved Japanese customs people. He was quickly pulled aside and searched.

"Why dry ice?" he was asked.

"Because," he replied, "I'm partial to it."

After more questions, more searching, he was finally let go. He waited a while and then went back to the locker. He repacked the interferon and strolled to customs.

On his first time through customs, he had been grilled extensively by several people. This time, as he had hoped, he was waved right through.

Later, the entry into the United States was "a piece of cake." He draped his coat over the briefcase and walked the alpha interferon through customs.

"Some of the big clubs don't appreciate us," Ron says one day in his small

office. "Their contention is that we move way too fast. Well, what's too fast? They say, 'Well, that drug may be toxic; we don't know about it.'"

By now Ron Woodroof is yelling:

"Damn it — I don't see how anything can be more toxic than HIV itself. I have taken chances that have almost killed me and I will keep on taking them. I have nothing to lose."

**D**r. Thomas Chalmers at the Harvard School of Public Health has something to lose — his patience. The most ardent spokesman against the AIDS underground is angry about buyer's clubs — and about the media.

"I say a lot of things over a long period of time (to reporters) and then whoever is doing it (the news report) sticks in the quote that best makes the buyer's clubs look better," he says, his voice filled with anger.

"I am against buyer's clubs primarily because, on the average, it is going to be worse for the people who have the disease to get their drugs off the street. They are liable to get impure or improperly regulated drugs, but they are also liable to take the wrong drugs at the wrong time. You can quote me on that."

Dr. Chalmers, who has become something of a pariah among AIDS advocates, swears he is misunderstood. "I can understand the desperation of people who feel that they have to have something and they will die if they don't. I'm very much in favor of them getting the best possible treatment, but on the average they are liable to be harmed by indiscriminate treatment."

He scoffs at the argument that the FDA and U.S. pharmaceutical firms are conspiring to drag their heels on getting drugs tested and approved — and he believes that the underground steers people away from carefully controlled studies run by drug companies.

For years, since AIDS became a scourge, advocates have argued that giant companies like Burroughs-Wellcome, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Hoffmann-La Roche have enjoyed a cozy relationship with the FDA — one that is now aimed at squelching the financially threatening AIDS underground.

"It is an understandable paranoia, but it is paranoia still," says Dr. Chalmers. "I think they (the FDA) are bending over more than they should. I think it (the agency) is running more scared (of AIDS activists) than it should."

On the other hand, the FDA doesn't use words like conspiracy, paranoia or bending over. To an extent, it has al-

lowed the underground clubs unprecedented leeway and has tended to look the other way when it comes to some club activities.

But earlier this year the agency announced sweeping inspections targeting buyer's clubs. Some clubs say it is a crackdown. "Right now, the best word to describe it is exploratory," responds FDA spokesman Brad Stove in Washington.

"Inspections will be held at each major buyer's club to determine what their inventories are, what their practices are, in order to get a better idea of what they are engaged in and how they are doing it. Our intention is whenever possible to work with these groups to make sure that they abide by our rules and regulations."

"We have two objectives. We don't want to obstruct a desperately ill patient from getting products that they may perceive to be helpful. On the other hand, we have a mandate to protect the public health and we are concerned when unapproved drugs are put on the market."

One thing the FDA definitely already knows is that clubs have been engaged in the widespread sale of a once completely unapproved drug called didanosine (DDC).

According to DDC's supporters, it  
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*Computer software writer Gary Lamborn, who has been diagnosed HIV positive, takes all these drugs and is constantly researching new ones. "If you are screwing with your body, you need as many variables as you can," he says.*

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can keep the HIV virus from using host cells to replicate its genetic material. Today, some restrictions on it have been relaxed.

Earlier this year scientists at FDA labs began analyzing underground versions of DDC. They had been tipped off that there may be batches of DDC floating around the United States with serious variations in potency and quality. The FDA already knew that high doses of the drug could cause nerve damage.

In an extraordinary move, the FDA issued an open call for the underground network to halt sales. In an equally extraordinary response, most people selling the underground DDC complied.

DDC, then one of the most widely sought-after underground drugs, automatically became scarce. Just as quickly, thousands of people began flooding their suppliers with calls.

The San Francisco buyer's club was

inundated with so many panicked inquiries that it was forced to answer with a stern recording that began: "DDC is not available. We do not have DDC in stock. DDC is not available at this time... We cannot predict when or if a renewed supply will be available. We cannot predict the cost or unit size. When we have it, this message will say so."

Almost all DDC was gone from the clubs earlier this year. Except, of course, the clubs in Dallas and Fort Lauderdale — the twin centers of anti-authority in the Age of AIDS.

Ron Woodroof had secured his DDC from special overseas sources and was convinced of its purity. Earlier this year, he even went so far as to help make DDC available to AIDS patients in Mexico.

He traveled to Mexico City for meetings with an AIDS specialist he swears is named Dr. Ponce de Leon. They cut a \$100,000 deal and without any hassle from the government moved DDC onto pharmacy shelves.

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"Hell, that's Mexico for you," he says with a cocky grin.

**W**hen Dallasite Gary Lanham, a softspoken creator of software for health insurance companies, heard that the FDA was hammering down on underground DDC, he immediately snapped up a 12-month supply.

And he began thinking of genocide. It's the word he uses to describe what is happening to people who are HIV positive.

"I think I bought the last 12 bottles that were available here," he says. After a pause, he has a rhetorical question. "What happens when those run out?"

When he was diagnosed, he was given six months to live. Now, he has been a customer with the Dallas club for four years. He holds a master's degree in hospital administration and does hours of research on drugs and his own medical condition. He has even made his own trips to Mexico seeking answers to his illness.

"It's a personal choice," he says. "If you are screwing with your body you need as many variables as you can." He is committed to DDC, even though there may still be bad batches of it floating around — and even though the jury is still out on its effectiveness.

"I have many friends who are on the drug. I think I have many friends who are alive today because of the drug," he says. And he ardently believes the corporate-federal bureaucracy will have blood on its hands if people lose underground drugs.

"It is a form of genocide. I hate to be that dramatic. But I think it is."

Recently, advisory committees to the FDA recommended that DDC be given a conditional approval.

Gary Lanham won't use such strong language about another concern — but it is one that he thinks is just as serious. Dallas, he claims, can be wildly disorganized, often fractious and competitive, when it comes to the groups addressing the issue of AIDS.

"We have people like Ron Woodroof, someone who doesn't have a whole lot of formal education, who has taken the initiative to do things. And he is not necessarily being supported by the gay community," says Mr. Lanham. "It is a travesty."

Meanwhile, though he and other

customers are generally behind the Dallas club, he hints at a concern — that he'd be happier with even more research by the club on its products.

Others have heard complaints about the Dallas club. John James, a former computer programmer in San Francisco who now publishes the influential *AIDS Treatment News* — a bible of the underground — says: "I don't know enough about them to want to knock them, but it (the Dallas club) has a reputation for being, when we look at their newsletter, of being careless along the line of allowing medical claims to creep into things they put out."

Meanwhile, in Fort Lauderdale, the ever-voluble Lenny Kaplan, head of that city's buyer's club, offers this: "I hear a lot of things about Dallas. Sometimes I hear that they are aggressive. Sometimes (people) say they are over-priced. The biggest complaint is that they are over-priced."

No one appears ready to say this kind of thing to Ron Woodroof's face. When he is told about some of the stories being told about the Dallas club he has a simple reply: "I don't personally like the guy in Florida. He's arrogant. He's just trying to push those bottles."

The Dallas club works closely with Dallas labs to ensure purity in its products — and mark-up is at a minimum, he says. No one, he claims, is getting rich from this underground business.

"We spend a lot of time and a lot of money. It is nothing to get a \$2,000 to \$3,000 phone bill," he practically shouts. "Wherever we can, we get it (the drug) down to the best possible price."

**D**r. Alan Hamill is a Dallas osteopath with 150 HIV-positive patients. Like many members of the medical community, he is reluctant to characterize his exact working relationship with the Dallas Buyer's Club. But, also like many members of the medical community, he admits that there are too few legally approved medical options for the terminally ill.

"It (the buyer's club) has provided a source of medications which we feel may be helpful prior to the system grinding its way forward," offers Dr. Hamill. "Researchers are completely opposed to buyer's clubs because they feel it undermines the purity of their experiments. But we feel we don't have the time."

He adds that if the FDA were going to try to close down buyer's clubs, he

would be willing to chain himself to the door of Ron Woodroof's operation in a demonstration of support. That fact — and the fact that the Dallas buyer's club has thousands of other allies, including lawyers ready to work pro bono — is not lost on the man who created and still commands the underground system.

"When you look around, you won't see that many people alive if they followed mainstream medicine," Ron says dismissively. It is a midafternoon and he is working out the details for a hastily arranged trip to Copenhagen. When he talks, he smears his conversation with curses — and careens back and forth between wicked sarcasm and conspiracy theories.

"Look at AZT (one of the few approved AIDS treatments). I don't know if I wouldn't prefer giving a shot at eating Comet cleanser. I'm serious. That stuff will eat you up," he says with a sneer.

There are a couple of other things Ron Woodroof claims he is sure of. Though his actions indicate otherwise, he swears he'd much rather be doing something else.

He says he *really* isn't a danger freak, shaking on the fear and waiting for the government's hammer to thud down — or for the shadowy underground to swallow him up.

"It is a frigging rat race. I have been strip-searched. The same people I deal with, not all of them, but a lot of them, are into moving cocaine, amphetamines — because you are right there in that channel," he says, his words beginning, again, to escalate in volume.

And, yes, there are days — like today — when even his smooth, drug-running cynicism is supplanted by outright, sheer anger.

And yes, if he dwells on it, he can easily see the about any number of personal affronts.

That he has to fool with that back-stabbing Mexican border. That he endures overzealous drug runs and passengers who loudly demand new airline seat assignments once they learn he is HIV positive. That he passed out in the garage of the old RepublicBank building — and almost died because he wasn't conscious and able to monitor the drugs being pumped into his body while he was hospitalized. That people say he is taking advantage of a desperate situation.

But none of this compares to the simple, big-picture wrath he reserves for the fact that this mad system of supply and demand — of capitalism gone crazy — has to exist in the first place.

"They can come in here and do whatever they want," the cowboy smuggler warns the government, the media, the medical establishment and anyone else he perceives as a threat to the underground.

"But hang on to your ass, the (expletive) will hit the fan."

Gill Miralagho is a staff writer for Dallas Life Magazine.